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AUTHOR Buzash, Michael D.
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ABSTRACT

The French Academy is the oldest of the scholarly societies of France. Its ideals and preferences of order, genius, and immortality have influenced the schools, conservatories, universities, and archives and the intellectual and artistic tastes of the time. Its foundation was laid by nine lettered, well-educated laymen and ecclesiastics around 1629. From the start the Academy placed top priority on composing a dictionary, the first edition of which appeared in 1694. In addition to literary tasks, the Academy was charged with the distribution of literary prizes. After having been suppressed, five academies were united under the name of the Institution of France in 1795. In 1803 Napoleon restructured this institution, which found its final form under Louis XVIII by royal ordinance in 1816. Members of the Academy select and elect new members. Speeches given by new Academicians must be written in perfect form, include a sincere expression of gratitude for the honor of acceptance into the Academy, and ardently bestow brilliance and accomplishment on the deceased predecessor. The "Larousse Encyclopedia" contains an interesting listing of candidates and explanations of the selection process. Among those not accepted into the ranks of the Academy are Moliere, Pascal, Descartes, Balzac, Michelet, and Flaubert. The Academy has preserved the purity of the French language, codified rules of usage, and has pondered the merits of human contributions and creativity. The Academy's projects have justified its being; the Academicians have immortalized the institution. (RS)

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"The French Academy: Arbitrator of Taste, Order, Genius--Immortality"

Michael D. Buzash

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Abstract

This paper treats the subject of the French Academy, its founding, purpose, responsibilities and its membership. France is unique in its academic attitudes and in its traditional endeavor to form an elite endowed with academic taste, talent, service and creativity that have contributed to the arts and letters and to the grandeur of France. Although the French Academy is one of several societies of France, it is the most influential in the intellectual world, the Humanities and the Arts and Sciences.

The standardization of the French language and grammar, the codification of rules and norms, and the recognition of exemplary figures in French Society are accredited to the French Academy, who with the Executive approval have established the most intellectual, elite group of France. Its lofty ideals and preferences of order, genius, and immortality have influenced the schools, conservatories, universities, archives, etc., and the intellectual, artistic tendencies and tastes of our times. The members scrutinize and judge with keen deliberation the works and the new candidate, seeking a chair for life. Consequently, the Academy is the highest order and establishment to judge both creativity, service, and worth. It serves as the clearing-house and the superior judgment that contributes to the renown of many writers, artists, and faithful servants to France.

Michael D. Buzash

Terre Haute, Indiana 47809
(812) 237-2368

"The French Academy: Arbitrator of Taste, Order, Genius--Immortality"

Michael D. Buzash

Indiana State University

The French Academy is the oldest of the scholarly societies of France. Its foundation was laid by nine lettered, well-educated men and ecclesiastics around 1629. This group decided to meet once a week for the sole purpose of conducting serious discussions on the French language and its literature. This was their taste and preference to that of attending the frivolous reunions of the salons frequented by aristocrats of both sexes. Richelieu considered himself well-read and of good taste; consequently, he imposed his protection and direction of the group who soon took the distinguished title, Académie Française. King Louis XIII conferred officially its charter in 1635. This charter specified that the principal function of the new association was to dedicate itself to "giving certain rules to our language and to render it pure, eloquent, and capable of treating the arts and sciences." (art. 24). Articles 25 to 28 enumerated the future activities of the association: analyze the best authors of the French Language to draw examples on which to base the rules: "it will compose a dictionary, a grammar, a rhetoric and a poetic code on the observations of the Academy" (art. 26).

From the start the Academy renounced drawing up a poetic and rhetoric code and placed top priority on the project of the dictionary. Just the same in 1695, it began a grammar; but very soon the group foresaw the difficult task to assume collectively.

Interestingly, this point of view was maintained up to 1932. Instead the grammatical works published and the authors were acknowledged by the Academicians. The Academy delegated to Vaugelas the task of publishing his work: Observations on the French Language (Remarques sur la langue française). The Academicians were to judge and respond at the start of the eighteenth century. On the thirteenth of July, 1719, the opinion was that the grammatical comments would be more useful in the Dictionary (Dictionnaire).

The Dictionnaire proved to be more successful. Even before the creation of the Academy, Chapelain had conceived the idea in 1634. He had conceived his plan, and then had consulted Vaugelas in 1635. Two problems arose at that time: should one include quotations of authors for illustration, or simply illustrate with examples created by the Academicians? In addition should one follow alphabetical order of words as modern dictionaries do, or follow that order of stems and word families? Vaugelas remained head of the first edition until his death in 1650. Mégeray followed by Régnier-Desmarais assumed the great task. Meanwhile, the Charter of Louis XIV declared the legal existence of the future dictionary and accorded to the king himself its exclusivity. Two years later the Préface and the Epitaphe were completed; soon after on August 24, 1694, the Dictionnaire was presented to the King.

After 1700 the Academy began the revision which terminated with the second edition presented to Louis XV on June 28, 1718. The third edition was dated September 8, 1740. This edition was distinguished by its revision of spelling; the fourth edition appeared January 10, 1762; the fifth edition was printed in 1798, although it was ready in 1792; the sixth came out in 1835; the seventh appeared in 1878. This edition added 2500 words and reproduced all the previous Préfaces; it also comprised a new Préface, affirming the importance of quotations. The eighth and the last one to be published appeared between 1932-35. This edition included many new words and suppressed many old ones. Interesting enough this same edition was the one that took the longest time to prepare. The last one was to appear in December, 1985. The Duke of Castries said pessimistically: "The new Dictionnaire whose complete edition will appear by chance in the twentieth-first century, will do honor to the French Academy." (p. 94).

In addition to the literary tasks mentioned, the Academy was charged with the distribution of literary prizes; however, this aspect was not originally foreseen by Richelieu in the original statutes of the association. He himself had reserved the prerogative of rewarding those whom he felt to be worthy. It was in the year 1654 that Guez de Balzac founded a prize of 200 pounds to be conferred for eloquence. It was awarded for the

first time in 1671, with three hundred pounds and a golden medal, carrying the head of Saint Louis and the motto of the Academy on the back reading, "To Immortality," encircled in a crown of laurels. It was conferred regularly on its laureates until the Great Revolution: Fontenelle in 1687, La Harpe in 1767, and Chamfort in 1769. Others founded a poetry prize whose funds were under the trust of one of the Academicians, Monseigneur Clermont-Tonnerre. It also conferred a medallion engraved with the head of Louis XIV to recognize the King's virtues. It was conferred for the first time in 1671. Among the laureates were Mme Deshoulières, 1687, Marmontel, 1745 and 1747, Chamfort in 1764, and La Harpe in 1766, 1771, and 1773.

The monetary value eroded; but Duclos, the Permanent Secretary, modified the code so that the prizes for eloquence and poetry would be conferred every four years with the prize of 600 pounds. The Constitutional Assembly eventually reorganized the French Academy and supported the principle of the annual prize; Napoleon in his decree of Aix-la-Chapelle increased the number of prizes, then modified the award in 1809. Louis XVIII doubled the value of the prizes in poetry. Napoleon III created in 1860 a bi-annual prize of 20,000 francs. Other prizes were established through the years; there exists presently more than 330 prizes under the prestige of the Academy. Around 125 are literary prizes and over 200 are prizes of virtue or merit. The monetary amount depends upon the current value of the franc.

The most important prizes are recently established ones: the grand prize of literature established in 1911, endows 50,000 francs; the grand prize of the novel, established in 1919, and a later one for poetry, established in 1957, are among the most respected. The Gobert Prize of 30,000 francs was awarded to the work, Europe and the French Revolution, by Albert Sorel. In 1960 the Academy itself established the prize destined to those authors whose service had contributed to the prestige of French Culture. Also the grand prize created in 1914 was destined to recognize a foreigner for his perfection in the use of the French Language. Pope Pius XII received this prize once.

There are other less prestigious prizes among which are those shared with the other associations of the Institute of France. The most prestigious is the Osiris Prize, similar to the Nobel, destined to reward the discovery or the most remarkable work in the sciences, the humanities, the arts, or in industry that embraces the general public welfare. Regardless of the monetary amount of the prize, the Academicians remain certain of one fact: they are proud of the glory or recognition that comes with the nomination rather than from the profit of the prize.

After having been suppressed, five academies were united under the name of the Institute of France in 1795.[1] In 1803

Napoleon restructured this institution which found its final form under Louis XVIII by royal ordonnance in 1816. The unique French Academy is one of the 5 and remains the most prestigious. The others are: 1) the Academy of Inscriptions and Humanities, founded by Colbert in 1663, to weigh the accomplishments in the fields of archeology and history; 2) the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences, created by the Convention and dedicated to the questions of law, philosophy, history, etc; 3). the Academy of the Sciences, founded by Colbert for the study of mathematics, physics, chemistry, etc.; 4) the Academy of Fine Arts composed of painters, sculpturers, musicians and whose various sections were successively created by Mazarin and by Colbert. On the other hand the Academy of Medicine, presently remains strongly independent, but scholarly and prestigious.

The French Academy is one of the oldest institutions, being preceded only by le Collège de France founded by Francis I. Both have preserved their traditions. The statutes of the Academy have been modified in order to adapt to contemporary socio-cultural structures. The number of members of the Academy has never varied since its founding; they remain at the "immortal forty." The social status of the forty remains as varied as at the time of Louis XIV: dukes, generals or marshals, prestigious politicians, writers, clergy, and other remarkable persons of the arts and sciences. Only the proportion seems to vary. Besides, the same chair can be occupied successively by one of a different title or discipline.

The members of the Academy select and elect the new members. Before election the interested candidate presents one's candidacy for a particular chair, requests to attend a reception and mingle with the members. There the person solicits support, favoritism, consideration, and election. The solicitation may have to be repeated often and during an extended period of time, as there is probably a potential competitor for the same chair. In all practicality the unnamed candidate will have to seek multiple consultations and visits, particularly with the Permanent Secretary to assure that one has a positive chance of being taken seriously. Once accepted, the new member is obliged to pronounce an eloquent discourse on the merits, prestige, and contributions of the predecessor whose chair will be assumed. It is known but not admitted that the elections are often against someone rather in favor of a candidate, and that the majority count is extremely narrow.

The manner of voting has changed through the centuries with hand count, black and white balls, ballots; even the number of members present has been modified. In 1752 the statutes were revised, stating that an election was possible if a quorum of twenty members were present. In this case, seven black balls were cast for a refusal. Eight would be necessary if 22 or 24

members were present. After the vote all discussion is terminated and ballots are destroyed. Formerly, the election result was submitted to the King for his final decision. If there were no decision, the Academy resumed its considerations, voting, and recommendations to the King.

Since 1816 the Academicians vote with small, yellow cubes placed into a black vase circulated by the responsible officer. If the voting reveals a majority one way or another, the results are final; on the other hand, a second vote or more may successively follow. Presently the Academy informs the President of the Republic by letter its final decision. He has the right to refuse the candidacy. Since the time of the monarchy, this refusal has only happened twice under the period of the presidency of General De Gaulle: for ten years the refusal of Paul Morand, who was finally admitted; on the other hand there was no reconsideration for Alexis Leger, known as Saint-Jean Perse, who took refuge in the United States in 1940, rather than join the General in London. The Academy upheld and praised the General's stand.

President Pompidou, a man of letters himself, upheld and respected the deliberations of the Academicians. D'Estaing and Mitterand have, also, accepted candidates and formal decisions of the Academy, as both presidents are men of letters. The fact that Leopold Senghor, past president of Senegal, was proposed, elected, and recommended as the first Academician from abroad in 1983, and preceded in 1980 by the innovative, provocative decision to accept Marguerite Yourcenar, novelist, the first woman in the Academy, are evidence of two decisions that won the executive approval.

After the obligations of the new Academician have been met, congratulations abound from all levels and places. Eventually, there are three things that remain to be completed: the fitting of the famous, traditional green outfit; the editing of the acceptance speech; the designing and ordering of the sword. The newly-elected expresses one's preferences of the symbols and designs that decorate the sword's pommette. The sword is traditionally presented by friends of the Academician.

As far as the garments, they will take about six months. Various fittings, adornments, and alterations are necessary. The outfit is also very expensive, costing as much as the total debts incurred by the Academy for one year. Jean Cocteau, who liked to shock the public, ordered his outfit from Lanvin at the exorbitant price of $1,400.

The speech must be written in perfect form and include a sincere expression of gratitude for the acceptance; moreover, it must ardently bestow brilliance and accomplishment on the

predecessor who is now deceased. After various revisions and solicited advice from close friends, the novice submits it to the Permanent Secretary for approval, then immediately procures printed invitations for select mailing to the cocktail reception under the majestic dome of the small hall where there, too, will be dissatisfaction from those not invited or turned away. Before the reception the sword has been restored privately followed by the enthronement.

When the date of the reception has been chosen, at 2:00 the elected Academician approaches the committee who, after accepting the speech, will allow the candidate to attend a business meeting from 3:30 to 4:00. The Permanent Secretary, the Chairperson, and some Academicians chosen by lots compose this committee. The candidate is invited to read his speech limited to one hour. Following, there are laudatory comments and remarks about the delivery, then there is the acceptance of the candidate with complimentary well-chosen words for forty minutes, by an Academician on behalf of the assembly. Soon after, the Immortals return to the business meeting and the order of the day. Two fellow Academicians approach the newly-elected and lead him to the officers; the Chairperson offers a welcome to which the candidate does not reply; the group continues with its business of the dictionary. It is customary to deliberate on only one word in honor of the new Academician who does not participate in the discussion. Finally, the meeting is adjourned.

The day of the reception is a very tiring one, although the solemn ceremony is only two hours. Starting with the morning the candidate receives the various honorary congratulations to which there is an individual warm reply. For the first time during the seance the candidate wears the uncomfortable-looking green outfit complemented with the unwieldy distinguished sword. They all gather in the library. Only eight Academicians may be dressed in costume, but twenty or thirty may choose to do so. At approximately three o'clock they return to the Cupola, officers leading, at the sound of the drums. All present rise, and the meeting is called to order. The candidate appears and reads his speech without interruption of applause until the final word. The President responds, there is another applause, and then the meeting is adjourned. They all enter the gallery where the recipient and his family lead to the reception usually held in the Countess of Caen Drawing Room as the Republican Guard presents arms. The following day the speech and the account of the ceremony will appear in the press for all to read.

At the time of Richelieu the Academy possessed nothing-place, financial support, or any renumeration for the Academicians. Meetings were held anywhere, and the participants paid the expenses. Séguier offered a place, furniture, and heat. Under the protection of Louis XIV, the Academy gained an area of

the Louvre, including furniture, heat, a library, and a minimal budget. Colbert, a supporter of the Dictionnaire, set up a toll charge per meeting. In 1676 the Academy was granted six seats at the royal presentations. Other advantages came about: a small stipend for the Permanent Secretary, prizes, medallions, etc. The Convention eventually annulled any financial support.

In 1805 under Napoleon's protection, the Academy was moved to le College des Quatre-Nations where it is still distinctly identified with the quai Conti, at the Pont des Arts, opposite the Louvre. Identified, also, as the Palais Mazarin, constructed in the 17th century, it is also the home of the Institute. Financial problems have varied through the years as much as candidates' selection and acceptance.

It is impossible in this short exposé to elaborate on the topic of selection; however, the selection through the years may appear interesting to those who have already studied the "great" writers as they are identified for students of French literature.

The Larousse Encyclopedia contains an interesting listing of candidates and explanations.[2] It is common knowledge that the play, Le Cid, by Pierre Corneille was the cause of great literary arbitration undertaken in the early years of the Academy. Corneille himself was elected three times 1644, 1646 and 1647; the last date represents the year of his acceptance when he was the only candidate for the chair. In 1643 La Fontaine was elected over Boileau, but Boileau was elected before the end of the year. After five nominations Fontenelle was elected over la Bruyere in 1691 under the influence of Mme de Lambert.[3] La Bruyere was elected in 1693 after having lost three times. In 1710 Rousseau lost to la Motte. In 1743 Marivaux was accepted over Voltaire after 3 nominations. Twelve years after his first solicitations, Voltaire was elected with a unanimity. In 1753 when the King refused the election of Piron, the chair was offered to Buffon. In 1755 Duclos, the new Permanent Secretary, brought about the acceptance of the "parti philosophique." In 1772 D'Alembert became Permanent Secretary after he had been accepted with the help of Mme du Deffand whose salon he had frequented.[4] In 1783 Marmontel, the favorite of Mme Geoffrin and Mlle Lespinasse and her salon became the Permanent Secretary.[5] Hugo was nominated in 1836, 1840, but won in 1841. De Vigny was nominated in 1842 and lost to Mérimée in 1844, but was elected in 1845. In 1862 Baudelaire withdrew from the candidacy for the Scribe Chair to repropose for the Lacordaire Chair from which he also withdrew.

In 1652 Queen Christine of Sweden was received at the Academy. In 1702 the slant on women was enhanced when the Academy admitted women to the receptions. In 1812 Chateaubriand refused to be received in order not to verbally praise his

predecessor, Chenier, and in order not to be presented to Napoleon. In 1826 Lamartine lost two elections. In 1828 the election of Lebrun revealed the favorable tendency toward Romanticism. In 1891 Zola proposed for the first time his candidacy for the Augier Chair. In 1897 he saw his chances disappear after his position on the Dreyfus Affair. In 1894 Verlaine applied for the Taine Chair without any votes in his favor. In 1897 the membership discussed the eventuality of the admission of women to the Academy. In 1911 the membership opposed the election of women to the Academy. In 1918 Joffre, Foch, and Clemenceau were elected by unanimity and acclamation. In 1932 the Academy published its first grammar with mixed reactions. From 1940-1944 the Academy adopted by majority vote an attitude of resistance, refusing new members, thus creating empty chairs. In 1942 Duhamel was elected Permanent Secretary, then resigned in 1944 in a disagreement over choices of persons he deemed necessary to restore the dignity to the Academy. The Chairs of Pétain and Maurras were emptied, but restored in later years.

The list of writers whom we recognize today is very long and not surprising. It would be very laborious to identify them, as we have already accepted them in our studies; however, it is more surprising to name those who were not accepted among the ranks of the Academy; among those were: Molière, Pascal, Descartes, Balzac, Michelet, then Flaubert, Baudelaire, Daudet, and Chenier. One of the distinguishing aspirations is the motto of the Academy "To Immortality." The recognition of the French Academy has been sought by writers, artists, intellectual leaders, and statesmen; it has been the bastion of gallic pride, preservation, purity; from it flows style, direction, tradition, and conformity. The Academy has preserved the purity of the French language, codified rules, usages, and has pondered the merits of human contributions and creativity. To reject the Academy is to refute authority at its source, to negate order, and to accept norms without standards. As J.R. Bruce wrote in his article on the Academy: "People have slandered the French Academy. They have reproached many times its blunders, its oversights, its biases, its conformity, its archaism. But its institution is so solid that it has defied the centuries, the wars, and the revolutions." The Academy's Permanent Secretary, Fontenelle wrote: "When we are forty, they mock us, but when there are thirty-nine of us, they are at our knees." Piron, the 18th century satirical poet wrote in Epitaph: "Here lies Piron, who was nothing, not even an Academician." Nevertheless, the Academy's projects have justified its being; its Academicians have immortalized the Institution.

Notes

1 Caput, 7; 2 Encyclopédie Grande Larousse, 39-40;
3 Buzash, Michael D., 57; 4 Ibid., 60; 5 Ibid., 54.

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